



Briefing Note

HISPANIC PATIENTS' DOUBLE BURDEN: LACK OF HEALTH INSURANCE AND LIMITED ENGLISH

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As the Hispanic population grew over the last decade—more than doubling during the 1990s—so too did the ranks of its uninsured. Now a new study finds that problems resulting from lack of health coverage are exacerbated for Hispanics who also lack proficiency in English.

In *Hispanic Patients' Double Burden: Lack of Health Insurance and Limited English*, Commonwealth Fund senior analyst Michelle M. Doty, Ph.D., finds that Hispanics with limited English skills are less likely than whites, African Americans, and English-speaking Hispanics to have health insurance or a regular doctor. Among those surveyed, 61 percent of Spanish-speaking Hispanic adults were uninsured during the year, compared with 36 percent of English-speaking Hispanics, 30 percent of African Americans, and 20 percent of whites. Two-thirds of the Spanish-speaking Hispanic population without insurance did not have a regular doctor. The analysis draws on findings from the Commonwealth Fund 2001 Health Care Quality Survey.

These results suggest that improvements in Hispanics' access to quality care may be best realized by focusing on this doubly burdened group. "The health needs of the burgeoning Hispanic population will continue to grow, and long-term negative health effects are likely if barriers to care—financial and language-related—persist," Doty cautioned. "Expanding health insurance coverage to working Hispanics and their families, as well as investing in programs that improve doctor-patient communication, are imperative for achieving better care for Hispanics and other minority Americans."

Compared with other groups, Spanish-speaking Hispanics also had more problems communicating with doctors, comprehending prescription bottle instructions, and understanding other written health information. Nearly half (45%) of Hispanics with limited English experienced a problem communicating with their doctor, although English-speaking Hispanics with health insurance were no more likely than insured whites or African Americans to report communication problems. In spite of prevalent communication problems, only half (49%) of Hispanics who needed an interpreter reported they "always" or "usually" had access to one.

Facts and Figures

- Nearly 20 percent of Spanish-speaking Hispanics and 16 percent of English-speaking Hispanics did not visit a doctor in the past two years, compared with less than 10 percent of non-Hispanic whites and African Americans.
- Only 43 percent of Spanish-speaking Hispanics who lack health insurance expressed a "great deal" of confidence and trust in their doctor.
- Among Hispanics assisted by an interpreter—most likely a staff person, family member, or friend—only 70 percent "fully" understood what the doctor was saying.